

TERRESTRIAL FIGURES/CELESTIAL BODIES: THE DRAWINGS OF SOL KJØK



Somewhere curled up in the predictable vertical of the word "spiraling", hides its unwieldy sister "swirling". Appropriately, "Swirling" is also the title of Sol Kjøk's series of figure drawings. Less predetermined, freer flowing than "spiraling", the title gathers in a circumambulating embrace both the formal aspects of these drawings and the processes of the mind behind them.

The completed drawings are the visual terminus of a much longer method, as winding and symbolically complex as the intertwining, overlapping pencil lines of the drawings themselves. Born from a diverse process, their surplus, or extravisual, meaning is to be found in the archeology of their making. Each image is a cluster, a composite of nude figures, based on photographs of Kjøk or her male subject.

In the photographs they separately reenact concepts of balance, reciprocal action, and opposing but mutually necessary forces. It is significant that each source photograph is only of either Kjøk herself or her male co-swirler acting in solitude, posing or gesturing in ways that imply an absent Other, or an invisible counteracting force field. This literal and figurative separation of bodies/ elements – what in many spiritual and philosophical traditions signify chaos or a state of imbalance – is restored to symbolic, if not visual, order in the finished drawings. The figures are united, intertwined or engaged in dynamic play, or struggle.

Though the initial photographic step is invisible in the end, one could speculate that this performative layer in Kjøk's creative archeology is driven by a desire to first experience as manifest reality the symbolic content of her own images. Nevertheless, this ultimately silent undercurrent links her work to the dispersive practices, which has become normative and constitutive of much contemporary art. Like rings on water, her performative process also reaches out to touch earlier art historical conventions such as the often sexualized relationship between an artist and - almost invariably – *his* subject. Without the loud, but historically necessary, protestations of overtly feminist art, Kjøk's method is a gratifyingly aware, but unselfconscious extension of feminist concerns about the model/artist/viewer relationship. Along her processual loop, which incorporates picture taking, laborious posing and performance, cutting, collaging, rearranging and finally meditative reassemblage through drawing and painting, Kjøk gets to don, all at once, the personae of creator, subject, voyeur, benevolent dominatrix, classical female nude, objecting feminist, and the subject of self-portraiture.

The presence of the sphere, teased out of every possible anatomical crevice, is a symbolic element which has become increasingly prominent in her work. More than a facile, tongue in cheek sexual metaphor, its symbolic meaning reverberates through many cultures and traditions. From the Christian Trinity, and the Chinese yin and yang, to the Buddhist idea of a spherical center from which spiritual power radiates, the sphere signifies the unification of different forces and energies. It thus has a natural place in Kjøk's constellations of male and female bodies in a perpetual struggle to achieve balance and unity through the exchange of sexual and psychic energy. Embedded in the sphere or circle shape is the idea of infinity, the absence of a tangible beginning or end. Kjøk's figures are always caught mid-action, each of them inhabiting a fragment of a longer moment whose beginning or end is elsewhere and inaccessible: No causal relationships, no narrative unfolding, only an infinite moment into which one can enter at any point. In the same way that the visual linearity of Edward Muybridge's famous horse photographs is emblematic of a philosophical belief in getting to some kind of truth about reality by systematic and scientific chronological sequencing, Kjøk's drawings mirror postmodernity's view of reality as having either many simultaneous centers, or none. They also reflect the slow but steady integration into Western culture of spiritual traditions whose core beliefs are in a cyclical, rather than linear, reality. Visually, the sphere is the anchor point of the compositions, striking the rhythm and forming a connective tissue between individual clusters of figures. Like the nucleus in an atom, it is the gravitational point around which the imagined positive and negative charges of the bodies arrange themselves, to form singular atoms or larger molecular compounds.

Though her work has a clear visual focus, Kjøk's net of personal experience, art historical sources and knowledge of iconography and symbolic imagery is cast wide enough to avoid preemptive readings. One could undoubtedly enter these physical, sexual images armed with the language of cultural politics, to speak of White culture's fetishization of Black males as sexual automatons, and Kjøk's own position as a member of that culture. However, in keeping with the complicated mesh of base sexuality and sophisticated symbolism, one may instead follow the widening rings of meanings even farther. In this case, they reach around the old Egyptian tradition of depicting men and women with dark and light skin, respectively - a symbolic device employed to ensure that the competing, but complementary forces imagined to constitute a functioning, balanced whole would be properly represented.

As a constant line through the many tangents that Kjøk's creative swirl inevitably touches runs the history of figurative drawing. The awesome anatomical renderings by Michelangelo, Leonardo, Dürer and Rembrandt are all summoned to our consciousness as living tradition by her meticulous and complicated pencil drawings. In an age when ambition and signs of personal investment are often eclipsed by evidence of production value, they remind us that hard earned skill and individual talent are not only useful for the person possessing them. The reason we marvel, secretly or not, at Kjøk's kind of devotional and focused labor, is that it allows us to glimpse the potential for unique and unexpectedly grand achievements in ourselves.